

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, ranking members Hwang, Somers and Petit and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Sarah Cohen and I am a resident of Hebron. I am a Movement Organizer with March for Our Lives, and I am writing in support of HB-5397. I am 20 years old and I am part of the school shooting generation.

I was nine years old when a gunman entered a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado and killed 12 people. Less than six months later, a gunman opened fire at Sandy Hook Elementary School an hour from my home, killing 26 people. I realized then that gun violence was not contained to movie theaters, nor was it somewhere far away. The active shooter drills in which I participated in the weeks, months, and years following Sandy Hook felt increasingly important. When no one knew if we were huddled silently in the corner of our classrooms as a drill or because someone was trying to hurt us, I was not worried about who I would play with at recess or what I would have for dinner because I was afraid those things would never come.

My experience is not unique. There are hundreds of thousands of young people in our state who have grown up in a world where gun violence is normalized. The lives of too many of our classmates, neighbors, friends, and family have been taken by bullets. During my lifetime, the CDC has reported a more than a 48% increase in gun deaths in the U.S. While Connecticut has made great strides toward preventing gun violence, the issue still plagues our communities. From 2015-2019, Connecticut averaged 185 gun deaths per year, according to CDC data, with our state's rate of firearm deaths per capita greater than or equal to our neighboring states.

As gun violence continues to worsen, with 2021 being one of the deadliest years yet, it is imperative that we do everything in our power to end this epidemic. Gun violence is a public health crisis, the magnitude of which statistics alone cannot express. We cannot quantify the physical, mental, and emotional toll of gun violence that overwhelms those left behind.

Establishing an Office of Gun Violence Prevention within the Department of Public Health is crucial to making our state a safer place. The experts within this office will evaluate the efficacy of our state's current gun violence prevention strategies and use this data to recommend improvements. It will ensure stable and reliable funding for violence prevention and intervention programs, funding generated in part by federal grants.

While there are multiple bills in this session that address community gun violence in Connecticut, HB-5397 is perhaps the most comprehensive yet, and I therefore urge you, personally and on behalf of March for Our Lives Connecticut, to support HB-5397.

Thank you for the privilege of your time.

Best,
Sarah Cohen (she/her)
Hebron, CT
Connecticut Movement Organizer- March for Our Lives